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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3822
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1640
RUEHKL/AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR PRIORITY 0140
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 0038
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1507
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 2076
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1419
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ASHGABAT 000680

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/29/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [EPET](#) [KEDM](#) [AF](#) [TX](#)
SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: BERDIMUHAMEDOV PLIES AND A/S
BOUCHER WITH POSITIVE OUTLOOK

REF: ASHGABAT 0677

Classified By: CDA RICHARD E. HOAGLAND: 1.4 (B), (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov told Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher:

-- Turkmenistan is committed to funding and building two new power stations to provide electricity to Afghanistan, and strongly supports the Trans-Afghanistan pipeline as a way to enhance stability and cooperation in Central and South Asia;

-- He fully endorses the concept of a hydrocarbon-funded state scholarship fund for Turkmen students to study abroad, but the "modalities" of such a program with the United States "need further study";

-- He is cautiously optimistic his economic reforms are taking hold; and

-- He sees constitutional reform as a way to enhance democratic values and practices in Turkmenistan.

Energy issues and relations with Azerbaijan are reported reftel. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher met with President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov for nearly two hours on May 28. Also present were Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov, Senior Adviser Caitlin Hayden, and Charge d'affaires.

13. (C) Berdimuhamedov noted Turkmenistan's priorities for Afghanistan are to extend its railroad into northern Afghanistan, provide significant amounts of new electricity, and push forward the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India

natural-gas pipeline.

AFGHANISTAN: ELECTRICITY AND BORDER SECURITY

14. (C) Boucher expressed gratitude for Turkmenistan's commitment to stability, security, and reconstruction in Afghanistan, emphasizing the value of electricity for education, business, and rural development. He added the United States sees roads and electricity as fundamental for Afghan stability. Berdimuhamedov reconfirmed Turkmenistan's commitment to fund and build two new gas-fired power stations in Turkmenistan to provide electricity for Afghanistan. He said, "As soon as USAID is ready on the Afghan side, we're ready to start."

15. (C) Berdimuhamedov said he has told Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai that he needs to pay more attention to border control. Berdimuhamedov said, "On the other side from our border, some days the Afghan government is in control, some days the Taliban. The Taliban are pushing Afghans closer to our border. We're providing humanitarian support, but the Afghans have to take more responsibility."

NATURAL-GAS PIPELINE THROUGH AFGHANISTAN

16. (C) Expanding on the importance of the trans-Afghanistan pipeline, Berdimuhamedov acknowledged Turkmen gas flowing south would increase Turkmenistan's national income and support its policy of diversification of export routes. But, he said, the most important reason for the pipeline is to

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enhance stability and cooperation in the Central-South Asian region. He estimated the pipeline could produce up to \$500 million per year in transit fees for Afghanistan and produce about 12,000 new jobs there.

17. (C) Boucher asked if Turkmenistan has identified volumes of natural gas for the trans-Afghanistan pipeline and whether commercial interest in the project, one of the keys to success, is growing. Berdimuhamedov responded he is confident that adequate volumes exist. He noted the UK firm Gaffney Kline is conducting an independent audit of Turkmenistan reserves, information that will be made public, but even now he is comfortable with the current estimate that Turkmenistan has reserves of 24.6 trillion cubic meters apart from what exists in Turkmenistan's portion of the Caspian Sea. He specified that the South Yolatan deposit is estimated to contain seven trillion cubic meters and added Turkmenistan has just identified another deposit 150 km outside of Ashgabat with an estimated 1.8 trillion cubic meters. Responding to Boucher's question about commercial interest, Berdimuhamedov said there is increasing interest from India.

18. (C) Berdimuhamedov acknowledged that security in Afghanistan is a key element. He made a pitch for his vision of a UN convention on pipeline security. He said he understands that commercial interests are usually responsible for pipeline security, but "Companies come and go; pipelines remain. That's why we need to guarantee long-term security." He asked that the United States consider supporting his vision for the UN convention he's proposed.

THE U.S.-TURKMENISTAN BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

19. (C) Berdimuhamedov noted the large number of U.S. delegations that have visited Turkmenistan since his February 2007 inauguration. In a quick review, he praised cooperation on border security, student exchange programs (including FLEX), the Peace Corps, and the possibility of university linkages with Columbia University and Texas A&M University. Boucher said the United States, during the past 16 months has made about 60 proposals for cooperation: "Several are especially important, for example in education." He noted how valuable it would be if Turkmenistan were to establish a

major university scholarship fund from its hydrocarbon revenues for up to 1,000 students per year to study in the United States. We are prepared to help administer such a program. Berdimuhamedov agreed this was an excellent idea. "My dream," he said, "is to provide our young people with the best access to international education to bring them into the modern world." However, he added, the modalities of such a program will require more study.

¶10. (C) Boucher noted the United States would like to see the American Corner in Turkmenbashi reopened (the Turkmen closed it two years ago) because it would help provide Internet access in Turkmenbashi as well as information for students who want to study in the United States. Berdimuhamedov responded there are already several successful American Corners in Turkmenistan: "We are not against them in principle and not against one in Turkmenbashi, but we need to study it more."

¶11. (C) Berdimuhamedov praised increased U.S.-Turkmenistan cultural cooperation and said he was pleased with the U.S. Embassy-produced program to teach English on state television. He pointed out that he has asked state

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television to cover more U.S. public diplomacy events, but then he complained that in one recent TV report he'd noticed that the flag of the United States was prominently displayed, but Turkmenistan's flag was "hidden behind the piano."

ECONOMIC REFORM

¶12. (C) In response to Boucher's question about the status of economic reform, Berdimuhamedov replied he had emphasized from his first days in office the importance of diversifying the economy, including building the textile industry. Preliminary results are encouraging, he said, but, most important, he wants more economic transparency and reliable world-standard statistics. He noted his government is cooperating with the United Nations to create a model development plan for Balkan province that, if successful, could be implemented nation-wide. When Boucher suggested a USAID-sponsored Investor Roadmap project might help support Berdimuhamedov's economic reform goals, the president replied there were already "quite good preliminary results" in that field with assistance from the European Union and the United Nations.

POLITICAL REFORM AND HUMAN RIGHTS

¶13. (C) The assistant secretary asked Berdimuhamedov to discuss his vision for political development, including human rights. The president expressed cautious optimism that his creation of new government institutes/think tanks is beginning to show results, especially the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights. He also explained in detail the current process to revise the constitution, which "is necessary for this new period." He emphasized the plan is to enhance the power of the parliament and phase out the unwieldy 2,500-member Peoples Council. The president suggested human rights issues, like the release of prisoners of concern, will be enhanced because, he alleged, currently the Peoples Council must approve prisoner releases. He said, "We will do more, go further." (COMMENT: We judge the president is disingenuous when he lays the blame for slow prisoner release at the door of the Peoples Council, especially since the current Peoples Council is simply a rubber-stamp for presidential decrees and government policy. END COMMENT.) Boucher noted the government is making important efforts in the area of human rights, and encouraged them to work with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the UN, technical experts from the United States and other nations, and with nongovernment organizations, like Human Rights Watch.

¶14. (C) Berdimuhamedov acknowledged rumors that the new

constitution might extend the presidential term from five to seven years. He said, "I'll stay neutral on that. Let others decide. Most important, I do not want to violate international standards."

¶15. (SBU) NOTE: Berdimuhamedov's read-out of his May 9-10 official visit to Baku is reported septel. END NOTE.

¶16. (C) COMMENT: After nearly a year and a half in office, Berdimuhamedov is increasingly self-assured. As always, he was well-briefed and conversed without prepared talking points. Clearly indicating his desire for a strong relationship with the United States, he emphasized the positive and glossed over some of the problem areas. END COMMENT.

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¶17. (U) Assistant Secretary Boucher has cleared this cable.
HOAGLAND